

Living in the present

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Patients look to us as physicians to cure what ails. When that fails it can be difficult to admit that to the patient, and to oneself. I wrote this poem after one of my patients with end-stage chronic obstructive pulmonary disease died after months of suffering. I suppose writing it was a way to deal with feelings of inadequacy and futility that we all face from time to time. The style was inspired by Charles Bukowski's poem "Hell is a Lonely Place."

Connie

Between gasps for air
she often wept.

She had not been outside
for 6 months,
a length of rubber tubing
connected to oxygen
commanded her range.

Few visitors.

"I used to be something to look at, you know.
Now look at me."
Again, she wept.

"Are my lungs getting any better?"

I averted my eyes,
reassured her, shamelessly.

Days passed.

"Well, will you help me die?"

I pretended not to hear her.
Instead suggested another drug,
commented on the impending spring.

"Some fresh air will lift your spirits."

I began to avoid her room,
passed by the open door,
in my clipped doctor's pace,
waved,
silhouette of her curved spine against the window,
each vertebra a prominent peak.

When she got sick,
this last time,
relatives arrived at her bedside
who had not been there for 6 months.

When she died she weighed 67 lb.

Dr McCarville practises hospital medicine in Cape Breton, NS.
He aspires to live in the present some day in the future.

Competing interests
None declared